

Placer Valley Auto Tour

Water, Gold and Silverheels

This series of auto tours crosses through National Forest lands and private landowners.

Some of the historic mining sites may contain mine shafts and other dangerous mine workings, most of which are on private land. Visitors should exercise caution when leaving their vehicles.

This 11-mile tour begins in Fairplay and follows Highway 9 to the summit of Hoosier Pass. Mileage for the following numbered auto tour stops begins at the old Park County Courthouse, which is now the library.

CHRONOLOGY-PLACER VALLEY
1849 - California gold rush
1858-59 - Depressed economy after Panic of 1857 sent gold-seekers west
1859 - Colorado gold rush; finds in South Park
1861 - Montgomery mining district formed
1860-63 - Height of small-claim placer mining in South Park
1861-65 - Civil War
1870's - Colorado silver strikes
1871 - Moose Mine discovered; coal mines opened near Como
1872 - Moose Mine reduction works built at Dudley
1873 - Town of Alma established; smelter built there; panic of 1873; national economic slowdown
1890 - Moose Mine closed
1891 - Cripple Creek gold rush
1892 - South Platte Forest Reserve created
1893 - Sherman Act demonetized silver; Colorado hit hard by Panic of 1893
1907- Pike National Forest evolved from South Platte Forest Reserve
1937 - Fire gutted Alma
1957 - Montgomery Reservoir completed

The first log cabin in the town of Fairplay was built in 1859. Many others followed. By the late 1860's Fairplay was the largest town in South Park. It became the county seat in 1867. Fairplay is one of the few gold rush towns to survive when the boom ended. Fire threatened to destroy it in 1873 but the determined townspeople rebuilt the ruined business sections. Some mining and dredging continued well into the twentieth century. Increasingly, cattle and hay

ranching provided livelihoods for the townspeople. Fairplay today offers a unique glimpse of pioneer life at the site of South Park City. This museum is comprised of buildings brought to the site from throughout South Park, a gesture of historical significance that saved these old structures from sure devastation of time and weather. The first Park County Courthouse, originally built in Buckskin Joe and moved to Fairplay for use until 1874, is there. The museum also contains the brewery and saloon of the Summer brothers, along with many more interesting old structures and artifacts.

Placer mining efficiency reached its peak in the 1920's, led by the South Park Dredging Company. The largest dredge was completed shortly before World War II. A menacing arm with 132 rotating buckets clawed its way through the bottom layers of gravel, dumping each bucketful into an onboard mill. This mechanical monster extended its pond and the adjacent mounds of discarded rubble we see today at a rate of one and a half feet each hour. Years after its productive life here ceased, when rust colored its gears and birds occupied its buckets, a mining operation from South America bought, packed and shipped the dredge to Colombia to mine tin.

If dredges represent the peak of placer mining, its opposite, a simple pan, symbolizes its origins. In 1859 gold was discovered outside Denver. Within months miners moved from Cherry Creek, Aurora and Boulder to the pick and shovel camp of Tarryall (see Boreas Pass Auto Tour brochure). Gold fever was contagious. Greed and selfishness infected the first claim filers. A band of late comers led by big Jim Reynolds were not welcome in the town they scornfully labeled "Grab All." Instead they pushed on to the banks of the South Platte, struck pay-dirt and established a camp open to anyone who might be looking for "fair play."

.2 miles Developments in Mining

(Pull onto the widened area on the left side of the highway)

The mounds of rubble bordering the river remain from the advancements in placer techniques employed after surface deposits played out. The first prospectors used pans to separate creek sediments from particles of gold found there. The work was tedious and laborious. To increase efficiency, men joined together and operated hand "rockers" and short sluice boxes to shake and wash the gold from the surrounding rock granules. Separating the surface sediments provided a measure of success by day's end. Small bags of gold eased aching backs and spurred the next day's sorting. The easy gold was pocketed quickly, and prospectors hungry for more soon abandoned their claims for the promise of new ground. Soon the banks that had financed many of the claims held the paper rights to them. Mining companies with investor backing purchased the claims in consolidated blocks large enough to employ new techniques. By diverting creeks through pipes and high-pressure nozzles, they were able to forcefully erode and wash adjacent slopes through long flumes. The residue of this massive earth moving and sorting technique was piled

behind wooden cribs and remains today as mounds of rock and rubble. Some of this waste is now being ground and screened for use as building gravel.

1.7 miles Deliberating Summer

In the early 1840's a sizable Ute Indian village occupied this site. To celebrate the summer's bounty before moving camp east of the Front Range for winter, a great feast was held each September. Truces with rival factions were called so that gambling, trading, and the purchase of wives could proceed. White trappers joined the festivities, often trading for squaw wives, offering beads, blankets and ponies, depending on the woman's age, beauty and domestic skill.

2.4 miles A Veiled Mystery

The lone peak ahead on the right is the mountain named for one of the more colorful legends from Colorado's mining days: a dance hall girl whose shoes gave her a nickname. Silverheels appears in stories set in Leadville, Fairplay and Alma. By most accounts, however, she lived and worked in Buckskin Joe, where she was reputed to be the most beautiful woman seen in those parts. Her beauty was matched by compassion, generosity and self-sacrifice. Smallpox struck the small town, and miner after miner took ill. Silverheels cared for each one until inevitably, she too contracted the disease. After the epidemic passed, the miners took up a collection as a means of thanking their faithful nurse but could find her nowhere. Some tell of a mysterious veiled woman seen walking the cemetery many years later, mourning the loss of friends and beauty alike, for the smallpox had left scars. She was never seen without the veil, and never identified.

The Town of Alma

Not until the silver rush of the 1870's did Alma come into existence. Reportedly named for Alma Janes, the popular daughter of a local storekeeper, the settlement sprang up at the confluence of Buckskin Creek and the South Platte River in 1873. The Boston and Colorado Smelting Company, using a process developed by Professor Nathaniel P. Hill of Brown University and based on methods used in Wales, built a smelting operation there the same year. Soon Alma became the refining center for the area.

In a three-year period between 1874 and 1877, Alma's population increased from 150 to 700. By 1878, the town had three hotels, a mercantile, two saloons, three churches, and a weekly newspaper. A year later, Alma appeared all but deserted, as prospectors, miners and their camp followers headed to Leadville. Like migrating swallows, Alma's residents followed rumors of new finds throughout the area. Five years later, when the Fanny

Barrett mines on Buckskin Mountain hit rich deposits, the roving fortune seekers were back in Alma.

The number of saloons, businesses and hotels increased, the Bank of Alma opened (only to be held up in the 1930's), and the town even supported a photographer. Gold sustained Alma; most efforts were in hydraulic operations. Ditches crisscrossed the area leading into a canal. Here three nozzles, one six inches and two seven inches in diameter, aimed water at the banks, opening large pits. Sand and gravel were washed down sluices a yard wide.

6.4 miles Silver Followed Gold

To the left and across the river, crumbling foundations and some tailings are all that remain of the Moose Mining Company headquarters and ore reduction works. The Moose Mine, discovered in 1871 on the side of Mt. Bross at 13,860', became the first productive silver mine in Colorado. Neighboring Mt. Lincoln also held rich ore deposits. Some of the family men who worked these high altitude mines lived in the shadows of these mountains in the cabin towns of Quartzville and Hillsdale. Bachelors often lived in bunkhouses at the mines.

The placer boom along the South Platte River near Fairplay owes its productivity to Lincoln and Bross. When valley glaciers covered these peaks and ground out their surface features, they uncovered and abraded veins of ore. Melt water flushed the debris down slope and deposited it in layers 501 to 1001 thick. For thousands of years, stream water has washed and tumbled these sediments, working the ore into fragments and freeing the heavier metals, especially gold, from the grasp of the rock formations. Some of the flecks and nuggets lodged in the streambed. Others filtered down through the glacial debris to bedrock and collected there in pockets. The early panners picked up the surface gold. Later, hydraulic techniques and floating dredges enabled miners to reach the lower deposits.

7.9 miles Great, Great, Great, Grandfather Trees

We often joke about living to be 100, but most of us never make it. Well, some incredibly tough old trees atop the ridge to your left have made it nearly nine times that far, and they're still alive. The bristlecone pine is the oldest known living tree, with some specimens near the California-Nevada border having survived over 4,500 years. The Colorado subspecies doesn't live that long, but these bristlecones do exhibit the hardiness and character unique to the species. They are found on ridge tops and high, dry southerly slopes all the way to timberline. There are perhaps more bristlecones in the South Park area than anywhere else in Colorado. The oldest living tree, over 2,400 years, has been found near South Park. The twisted, wind-blasted trees near timberline offer a magnetic

blend of ugliness and beauty that fascinates many photographers and painters. These indomitable, tortured survivors radiate a mystique all their own. The thin fringe of trees on the ridge top to the left marks the edge of the Windy Ridge Scenic Area, which has been set aside to protect some outstanding timberline bristlecones. (Windy Ridge is accessed via the Buckskin Gulch Road, which leaves Highway 9 in midtown Alma.) High on the ridge to the right, more bristlecones cling to the rocks as they demonstrate a life force that all but defies human expression.

10.8 miles More Precious than Gold

From the overlook on the west side of the highway, one sees Montgomery Reservoir. The town of Montgomery, now at the bottom of the reservoir, was once the hub of an active mining district formed in 1861. The following year, a thousand residents lived in Montgomery, a lively town with assorted hotels, saloons, mills, a mercantile, and several churches. The mining operations dwindled in productivity by 1866, leaving the town with few inhabitants and a single log hotel.

11.3 miles Highway History

Gold seekers, far from their Indiana Hoosier roots, named this pass but were not the first to use it. Most of these passes were first traveled by game moving between seasonal grazing ranges, then followed by Indians who subsisted on hunting. The mountain men and fur trappers knew and used the pass. By the 1840's, interest in opening and exploiting the West had grown. In 1843 John C. Fremont, intent on mapping a route to the Northwest, led an expedition through the pass. The discovery of gold throughout the Mineral Belt region broadened footpaths into wagon roads to haul supplies in and ore out. The country's Continental Divide has been traversed for diverse purposes for many, many years.

Water has become the substance with lasting value in these mountains. The Front Range communities of Denver and Colorado Springs quickly outgrew their local water supplies. Dams and local reservoirs in adjacent watersheds sufficed for a period; then the purchase of more distant water rights began. Antero Reservoir, siphoning 45% of the South Park water rights, was finished in 1913 to supply water for irrigation between Denver and Greeley. In 1957, Colorado Springs completed the Montgomery Reservoir to impound water taken from Blue River watershed, north of Hoosier Pass. With the combined losses of water rights, mining activity and railroad tax revenues, South Park has not developed heavy industry, leaving ranching and tourism as the primary industries.

Maintaining a healthy watershed that captures and gradually releases spring snow melt and summer rains is a primary management objective of the Pike National Forest. One third of Colorado's population lives along the Front Range and depends on watershed productivity of these forested lands. Plant cover enhances watershed functions by holding soil in place and generating a covering of leaf litter that slows water movement into year-round streams.

For more information, contact:

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